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ESSAY

# Strangers in the Village: James Baldwin, Teju Cole, and Glenn Ligon

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## Abstract

This essay uses Edward Said's theory of affiliation to consider the relationship between James Baldwin and contemporary artists Teju Cole and Glenn Ligon, both of whom explicitly engage with their predecessor's writing in their own work. Specifically, Baldwin's essay "Stranger in the Village" (1953) serves a through-line for this discussion, as it is invoked in Cole's essay "Black Body" and Ligon's visual series, also titled *Stranger in the Village*. In juxtaposing these three artists, I argue that they express the dialectical energy of affiliation by articulating ongoing concerns of race relations in America while distinguishing themselves from Baldwin in terms of periodization, medium-specificity, and their broader relationship to Western art practice. In their adoption of Baldwin, Cole and Ligon also imagine a way beyond his historical anxieties and writing-based practice, even as they continue to reinscribe their own work with his arguments about the African-American experience. This essay is an intermedial study that reads fiction, nonfiction, language-based conceptual art and mixed media, as well as contemporary politics and social media in order consider the nuances of the African-American experience from the postwar period to our contemporary moment. Concerns about visibility/visibility in the public sphere, narrative voice, and self-representation, as well as access to cultural artifacts and aesthetic engagement, all emerge in my discussion of this constellation of artists. As a result, this essay identifies an emblematic, though not exclusive, strand of African-American intellectual thinking that has never before been brought together. It also demonstrates the ongoing relevance of Baldwin's thinking for the contemporary political scene in this country.

**Keywords:** James Baldwin, Teju Cole, Glenn Ligon, "Stranger in the Village," intermediality, affiliation, race relations

There is nothing new. And what is new is always very, very old; it is always you.

James Baldwin<sup>1</sup>

[I]n writing, the dear wish is always to write something by which you outdistance your ordinary reach. The text is a telescope, or a spacecraft.

Teju Cole<sup>2</sup>

These observations, from interviews with James Baldwin and Teju Cole, reflect art's capacity for time travel, its endurance. Carrying the residue of its moment of production, imbued with the historical consciousness of the artist who creates it, and intended, consciously or not, for future reception, the artwork embodies what is old, what is "you," and what might outdistance "you." It can express pessimism and optimism at once; the pessimism of its moment, the optimism of its futurity. Thus, ordinary moments of creative or intellectual rigor can be sustained and even reanimated when an artist from one generation intentionally takes up the work of a predecessor. At its most powerful, this deliberate engagement exceeds mere homage. Rather, as I will show here, responding to a past artist's work *relates* the contemporary figure to his or her historical counterpart, evoking filiation, though notably reversing the process of adoption. What happens when the child adopts the parent? How do their temporal and stylistic differences enliven the shared values that brought them together? These questions will guide our study of a creative genealogy that relates James Baldwin to African-American and African diasporic artists like Glenn Ligon and Teju Cole. Using Baldwin's essay "Stranger in the Village" as a through-line to consider the connection between these figures, I examine how he continues to shape a tradition of black artists and public intellectuals, sparking affiliative bonds across generations of racial, cultural, and political history.

Born in 1924, 1960, and 1975 respectively, Baldwin, Ligon, and Cole constitute a distinguished genealogy of black writers and artists across the twentieth century, with Ligon and Cole carrying this tradition well into the post-millennial period. While Baldwin and Cole are known as writers, and Ligon as a visual artist, all three showcase enthusiasm for, and indeed produce, interdisciplinary work. James Baldwin's friendships and collaborations with visual artists like Beauford Delaney and Richard Avedon, among others, has most recently been highlighted in *God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin*, a powerful exhibition curated by Hilton Als at the David Zwirner Gallery in New York.<sup>3</sup> Included in this wide-ranging group show is Glenn Ligon's painting *Stranger #73*, which references Baldwin's essay and is representative of Ligon's work with text-based canvases. Teju Cole also traffics in visual production, though he is best known as a novelist and essayist, whose books *Open City* (2011), *Every Day is for the Thief* (2007), and *Known and Strange Things* (2016) have situated him at the vanguard of contemporary American literature. Originally trained as an art historian, Cole is also a prolific photographer and served as photography critic for the *New York Times Magazine* from 2015–19. His recent project *Blind Spot* (2017), which I have discussed

elsewhere, is a photo book with allusive prose passages that accompany each image.<sup>4</sup> A Nigerian American, Cole's relationship to Baldwin and Ligon expands the orbit of black identity to the African diaspora, even as he remains particularly focused on interrogating race relations in America. While each of these figures warrant, and have received, individual scholarly attention, my interest here is to concentrate on their affiliative power, which finds a meaningful formal nexus in Baldwin's early essay "Stranger in the Village."

"Stranger in the Village," first published by *Harper's Magazine* in 1953 and later included in Baldwin's collection *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), has long been recognized as one of his most influential essays, enjoying a critical afterlife in discussions of race, visual studies, and cosmopolitanism. Teju Cole and Glenn Ligon explicitly reference this essay in their written and visual work, using Baldwin's own words to clarify how they relate to him and understand his abiding relevance to black identity. I frame their relationship in terms of affiliation, a concept I borrow from Edward Said, who in his seminal essay "Secular Criticism" defines the relationship between filiation and affiliation, as "the passage from nature to culture."<sup>5</sup> Simply, we cannot choose our filial ties, being born into them, but we can construct affiliative relations with others based on meaningful aesthetic, social, or ideological orientations that arise beyond the limits of filiation. For Said, affiliation should function dialectically, never merely affirming or reproducing what came before, but instead permitting, indeed encouraging, new perspectives that deepen shared concerns through original production. My reading of these artists identifies a common conviction—that being a "stranger in the village" is both a status to overcome and a source of potential power—while emphasizing the distinctive aesthetic, historical, and political pressures each brings to bear on the question of black identity and culture.

In "Secular Criticism," Said cites several examples of literary writers who establish such affiliative bonds in order to construct new symbolic orders of meaning while identifying with pre-existing traditions, noting that this is, in part, how writers cultivate their work and its reception.<sup>6</sup> While Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* deploys Freudian psychology to theorize the pressure that literary ancestors may impose upon their successors, Said suggests that if undertaken with critical consciousness, the practice of affiliation can be generative, leading to what I will call, after Henri Bergson, "creative evolution."<sup>7</sup> Creative evolution occurs intuitively, stimulated by what Bergson calls a "vital impetus," or *élan vital*, which he clarifies as not "automatic," but "analogous to the order 'willed.'"<sup>8</sup> In other words, sensing an undercurrent of kinship, one *elects* to tap into the affiliative order, introducing new experiments for its continuation. The formal resources Baldwin, Cole, and Ligon bring to their work, and their critique of race relations in America more generally, supplies new ways of thinking about old problems, especially when considered in conversation with one another. Notably, Said explains that affiliation creates a "new community," which is "greater than the individual adherent or member."<sup>9</sup> This valuation of "greater than," however, depends upon sustaining the distinctions that each adherent brings to the collective. Thus the affiliative community must avoid orthodoxy and the consecration of established perspectives or

ways of thinking. And so, while Ligon and Cole invoke Baldwin's "Stranger in the Village," they also show how new aesthetic forms and (always protracted) political progress advance the creative evolution of contemporary black artists and writers. In so doing, Ligon and Cole avoid the danger of affiliation replicating filial ties, a tendency which quells its creative power. If affiliation becomes "in effect a literal form of *re-presentation*," then, Said argues, it lags behind the present, failing to bring new aesthetic forms and critical consciousness into being.<sup>10</sup> By telescoping our discussion of Baldwin, Cole, and Ligon through the lens of "Stranger in the Village," I hope to show how these artists volunteer themselves toward an affiliative dynamic premised on their shared racial identity, even as they underscore the formal and historical differences that keep it from internal collapse.

### Baldwin: The First Stranger in the Village

James Baldwin wrote "Stranger in the Village" in 1951 while living alone at the family home of his friend and lover Lucien Happersberger in Leukerbad, Switzerland. He had decamped there in order to write and complete his first novel. For months, he stayed in the remote village, experiencing both a profound sense of alienation and a rediscovery of his identity as an African American. Baldwin begins the essay by describing how it felt to be the first black person the Swiss villagers had ever seen, and then proceeds to a broader discussion about race relations, cultural inheritance, and the psychic dislocation of the African-American subject. An unexpected parallel, based on the condition of homelessness, emerges here between Baldwin and European scholar Erich Auerbach. Also writing at mid-century, Auerbach exemplifies Edward Said's theory of critical consciousness in "Secular Criticism." Specifically, Said recognizes the productive, if problematic, potential of homelessness in Auerbach's exile from Europe during World War Two, suggesting that being homeless gave Auerbach, who had fled the Nazi regime, the critical perspective to write his great tome on European culture, *Mimesis*:

Yet Auerbach explicitly makes the point that it was precisely his distance from home—in all senses of that word—that made possible the superb undertaking of *Mimesis*. How did exile become converted from a challenge or a risk, or even from an active impingement on his European selfhood, into a positive mission, whose success would be a cultural act of great importance?<sup>11</sup>

Both Baldwin and Auerbach fled from their homeland to escape racial or ethnic intolerance, choosing instead to live and write among strangers. Like Auerbach, Baldwin arguably produced some of his best work while living in exile. Elsewhere, Baldwin admits that he was only able to write about America by leaving it; his escape freed him to see conditions at home with a degree of emotional detachment otherwise impossible.<sup>12</sup> The rage he felt as a gay, black man in postwar New York paralyzed his writing, and his move to Europe was an attempt to save himself as an artist, to begin to identify, however impermanently, as a subject operating

with relative freedom from duress. In his essay on Said's "Secular Criticism," Aamir R. Mufti explains how a newly liberated self-identity empowers the racialized subject: "The Saidian critical position implies, I shall argue, not a contentless cosmopolitanism but a secularism imbued with the experience of minority—a secularism for which minority is not simply the name of a crisis."<sup>13</sup> This formulation helps us to imagine how living in Europe enabled Baldwin to cultivate an identity not wholly determined by an understanding of his blackness as "tragedy," as he writes years later.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, his experience as a self-described "interloper" paradoxically brought him closer to an understanding of himself as a native son.<sup>15</sup> Homelessness freed him to articulate the subtlety of what was unique, and uniquely painful, about being African-American.

Baldwin begins "Stranger in the Village" by describing his own shock at being so visibly shocking to the Swiss inhabitants of Leukerbad. He repeatedly places the word "sight" in quotation marks to underscore how his appearance in the village subsumed his personhood: not a three-dimensional man, but simply a "sight." Stared at, dubbed "Neger!" by the children who ran after him, Baldwin explains his status as a phenomenon: "there was yet no suggestion that I was human: I was simply a living wonder."<sup>16</sup> Although this awestruck response differed from the often aggressive hostility he faced as a black man in New York, it was equally dehumanizing, rendering Baldwin less a living subject than some kind of miraculous object. In the essay, he suggests that this radical dislocation at a physical and psychic level epitomizes the historical alienation of the African American. At home neither in America, Europe, nor for that matter Africa, the African American lacks access to a long ancestral history. He writes, "I am told that there are Haitians able to trace their ancestry back to African kings, but any American Negro wishing to go back so far will find his journey through time abruptly arrested by the signature on the bill of sale which serves as the entrance for his ancestor."<sup>17</sup> Slavery and the Middle Passage irrevocably severed such filial history, and with it, for Baldwin, the cultural heritage and interpersonal belonging that might supply a native origin for his creative identity.

For Baldwin, this fragmented ancestry triggers an aesthetic crisis in which he struggles to feel at home with the cultural artifacts he most admires. Whereas a poet like T. S. Eliot may enjoy affiliative ties to Shakespeare, Dante, or William Blake, Baldwin felt the works of these artists were not his for the taking. He laments the disconnection he feels from the masterpieces of Western civilization, art that he imagines ordinary white Europeans or Americans enjoy as their unqualified birthright. In what is perhaps the most famous passage of this essay, he writes:

These people cannot be, from the point of view of power, strangers anywhere in the world; they have made the modern world, in effect, even if they do not know it. The most illiterate among them is related, in a way that I am not, to Dante, Shakespeare, Michaelangelo, Aeschylus, Da Vinci, Rembrandt, and Racine; the cathedral at Chartres says something to them which it cannot say to me, as indeed would New York's Empire State Building, should anyone here ever see it. Out of their

hymns and dances come Beethoven and Bach. Go back a few centuries and they are in their full glory—but I am in Africa, watching the conquerors arrive.<sup>18</sup>

Here, Baldwin collapses the opposition between nature and culture to suggest that the Swiss villagers, by virtue of their racial identity, enjoy a filial right to the artists and their masterpieces that Baldwin himself could never claim. And, because he cannot trace his lineage back to Africa either, he feels homeless in every sense: physically, culturally, and spiritually. The rest of the essay elucidates the complex relationship between black and white Americans: their proximity, mutual interdependency, and shared difference from white and black people elsewhere in the world. With an effortless discursivity that would become his signature style in nonfiction, he sweeps back and forth in history, tracing the formation and effects of what he considers the singularity of the American racial crisis.

Using the structural freedom of the essay form, Baldwin looks ahead to a distant future, suggesting that the survival of the African-American subject “depends upon his ability to turn his peculiar status in the Western world to his own advantage and, it may be, to the very great advantage of that world. It remains for him to fashion out of his experience that which will give him sustenance and a voice.”<sup>19</sup> In the work of Teju Cole and Glenn Ligon, I argue, we’ll glimpse what such “advantage” might look like, and how, in their affiliative adoption of Baldwin, *they* are able to “give him sustenance and voice” in the future. These artists attempt the same task Mufti attributes to Said: “to recall and to recuperate for the present what he considers to have been ‘the destiny of critical consciousness in the recent past.’”<sup>20</sup> This transhistorical effort requires Ligon and Cole’s careful readings and revisitations of Baldwin’s “Stranger in the Village,” but also their capacity to be more than what Said calls a mere “midwife” to their predecessor’s ideas.<sup>21</sup> Their creative evolution shows how, even when history repeats itself, it does so with a difference, producing forms of aesthetic or political freedom previously unimaginable.

### Teju Cole: Body Double and Beyond

“Stranger in the Village” is the last essay included in *Notes of a Native Son*. Fitting, then, that Teju Cole takes it up in the first essay of his own collection *Known and Strange Things* (2016) some sixty years later. In this literary baton pass, Cole’s essay, “Black Body” reflects on Baldwin’s experience in “Stranger in the Village,” and advances beyond it, offering the perspective of a contemporary black man writing in a far more porous and interconnected global landscape. A Nigerian-American writer and photographer, in his nonfiction Cole displays a penchant for retracing the journeys of artists he admires, be it René Burri’s São Paulo, W. G. Sebald’s rural England, or Baldwin’s Switzerland. In “Black Body,” he writes about traveling to Leukerbad on what would have been Baldwin’s 90th birthday, taking with him a copy of *Notes of a Native Son* and listening on his laptop, as Baldwin



did on a record player, to Bessie Smith singing the blues. It is then that he has what he calls a “body-double moment”:

here I was in Leukerbad, with Bessie Smith singing across the years from 1929; and I am black like him; and I am slender; and have a gap in my front teeth; and am not especially tall (no, write it: short); and am cool on the page and animated in person, except when it is the other way around; and I was once a fervid teenage preacher . . . and I, too, left the church; and I call New York home even when not living there; and feel myself in all places, from New York City to rural Switzerland, the custodian of the black body, and have to find the language for all of what that means to me and to the people who look at me. The ancestor had briefly taken possession of the descendant. It was a moment of identification.<sup>22</sup>

Here Cole enjoys an ancestral pull in Switzerland that Baldwin himself had lacked. This “moment of identification” could not be more intimate; far from the estrangement Baldwin felt in Leukerbad, beholding his memory Cole feels held, “taken possession” by the forefather. Baldwin endures with Cole because of the latter’s intentional identification with him as a black artistic forefather. Nature and culture align to effect this communion, as if the writers’ shared physical resemblance and creative practice, not to mention Cole’s reenactment of Baldwin’s experience, guarantee the privilege of cultural inheritance.

Cole describes this uncanny moment early in the essay by suggesting a filial tie with Baldwin as common “custodians of the black body.” However, this fact of nature also compels certain cultural responsibilities, insofar as both writers contend with the symbolic representation of their bodies in the world. They will have to “find the language” to understand and represent what this identity entails. Their audience is not simply the reader, but more broadly, those whose gaze or glance falls upon the custodian. While Baldwin’s experience of the pressures of visibility was largely embodied, Cole now operates in a digital age where photographs, videos, and social media play a far more pervasive role in shaping how we see and are seen by others. Indeed, Cole has participated on such platforms, perhaps most notably on Instagram, where throughout 2018 he posted details of paintings occasionally accompanied by cultural commentary. Forgoing faces or concrete images in favor of abstraction, Cole’s Instagram posts nevertheless raised racial and political questions. The pictorial details of brushstroke and color he posts at once intensify the act of visual discretion and evade the conventional image regime associated with contemporary social debates. This unusual juxtaposition of vivid color and social critique then initiates a lesson of looking and making meaning anew. In one post that pictures a broad, yellow brushstroke in detail, Cole echoes Baldwin’s objection to being taken for a “sight” rather than a man in Leukerbad. Documenting a series of recent incidents of racial bias and the targeting of black citizens, he includes as a refrain, “Can blacks be human? Why do blacks so badly want to be human?”<sup>23</sup> This post was part of a series Cole entitled “Hospitality,” in which he explored the question of who gets to feel “at home” in America and why. By locating this discussion at the level of the *humanity* of the black citizen, Cole recalls the radical alienation Baldwin felt in white America and beyond.



Indeed, Cole's use of Instagram is just one of the ways in which his cultural production reflects his historical difference from Baldwin. At once more abstract and yet still painfully overdetermined, the visual provocations of the twenty-first century paradoxically render the black body invisible and dangerously conspicuous. In his engagement with Baldwin, then, Cole grapples with how old problems have developed new complexities. After his body double moment with Baldwin in "Black Body," Cole goes on to describe how Leukerbad has changed, especially insofar as its inhabitants are now familiar with black people and culture. Cole sees other black people on his visit, as well as foreigners more generally, not to mention all the signs that global capitalism has left its commercial mark on this once-remote village. From within this dramatically altered contemporary landscape, Cole then observes that his own subjectivity as a black man diverges from Baldwin's due to the historical changes and political movements of the intervening decades between their respective visits to Leukerbad.

Baldwin, as we know, eventually returned to America in the 1960s to participate in the civil rights movement. As a result of these efforts, Cole points out, Cole himself enjoys a more permissive relationship with Western art and culture. In "Black Body," he references Baldwin's remarks about the cathedral at Chartres, and then highlights the black cultural icons who now comprise an "all-star team" rivaling Baldwin's prior list of white European masters: "Coltrane and Monk and Miles, and Ella and Billie and Aretha. Toni Morrison, Wole Soyinka, and Derek Walcott . . . Audre Lorde, and Chinua Achebe, and Bob Marley . . . Alvin Ailey, Arthur Ashe, and Michael Jordan."<sup>24</sup> He concludes this list with Baldwin, enjoying the pride of racial identification which, he imagines, Baldwin lacked at the time he wrote "Stranger in the Village."<sup>25</sup> Although in later essays, Baldwin would go on to celebrate talented contemporaries and friends like Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, and Josephine Baker, in his writing from the early fifties he appeared noticeably more alone. He had, at this point in his career, already challenged his associative ties with Richard Wright, who had been an early contact in Paris. Indeed, Baldwin's scathing rebuke of the latter's *Native Son* in the essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" reveals his early grasp of the need for critique and differentiation within affiliative communities.

Years later, Cole writes from a decidedly more secure cultural orientation, highlighting how the "all-star team" of black cultural ancestors legitimates his access to white and black art:

There's no world in which I would surrender the intimidating beauty of Yoruba-language poetry for, say, Shakespeare's sonnets, or one in which I'd prefer chamber orchestras playing baroque music to the koras of Mali. I'm happy to own all of it. This carefree confidence is, in part, the gift of time. It is a dividend of the struggle of people from earlier generations. I feel little alienation in museums, full though they are of other people's ancestors. But this question of filiation tormented Baldwin.<sup>26</sup>

Cole feels that he can "own all of it," that he is entitled to art made, as he puts it, by "other people's ancestors." There is no metric by which he feels compelled to judge one culture's art as superior to or more expendable than another. Arguably, this

inclusive assurance stems not only from “the gift of time,” which he rightly acknowledges as a historical subject, but also from his capacity for what Walter Mignolo and Madina V. Tlostanova have called “border thinking.”<sup>27</sup> In her discussion of Nigerian-American writers, Miriam Pahl writes, “Cole and [Chimamanda Ngozi] Adichie both describe experiences of racial discrimination in American society, but they also share an enhanced position in terms of mobility and resources, which is amplified in the differently organized virtual world.”<sup>28</sup> Cole’s contemporary participation in a digital age, his identity as a Nigerian American, and his interdisciplinary work expand his imaginative, indeed physical, capacity to maneuver through cultural time and space. With this broader berth to develop his racial identity as one component of his cultural inheritance, Cole’s experience and production of art evinces a kind of creative evolution from past generations. By this I do not mean that Cole is more sophisticated, productive, or gifted than Baldwin, but that he enjoys more opportunities to experience past and present culture without feeling alienated or risking rebuff. As he says about Baldwin, in what is, to my mind, the most poignant line of “Black Body”: “What he loves does not love him in return.”<sup>29</sup> But in a subtle elaboration, Cole shows that it is not *art* that refuses to love us, but those individuals who control access and reception. That Baldwin felt he was trespassing on another culture in the cathedral at Chartres reveals his vulnerability and issues a warning that Cole gravely comprehends. The latter’s “carefree confidence” in the face of Western art belies a fierce prerogative to seek recompense for the earlier struggles of black artists. He *will* have it all because they didn’t.

In Cole’s novel *Open City* (2011), his narrator Julius is also a Nigerian American who is a connoisseur of the arts. He visits galleries and museums, listens to classical music, and attends concerts. These experiences inspire him in ways that his interpersonal encounters often do not. Detached and, it turns out, repressed about his past, Julius repeatedly turns to art for gratification, engaging it with little impediment. Still, he is reminded of his status as a black subject in certain rarified, “all-white” spaces, noting, for instance at a concert in Carnegie Hall, that he is an uncommon “sight,” to use Baldwin’s loaded term, in such arenas:

Almost everyone, as almost always at such concerts, was white. It is something I can’t help noticing; I notice it each time, and try to see past it. Part of that is a quick, complex series of negotiations: chiding myself for even seeing it, lamenting the reminders of how divided our life still remains, being annoyed that these thoughts can be counted on to pass through my mind at some point in the evening . . . The only thing odd, to some of them, is seeing me, young and black, in my seat or at the concession stand. At times, standing in line for the bathroom during intermission, I get looks that make me feel like Ota Benga, the Mbuti man who was put on display in the Monkey House at the Bronx Zoo in 1906. I weary of such thoughts, but am habituated to them. But Mahler’s music is not white, or black, not old or young, and whether it is even specifically human, rather than in accord with more universal vibrations, is open to question.<sup>30</sup>

Without conflating the author and his narrator, I want to consider these remarks in terms of the cultural authority Cole claims to have in “Black Body.” Here, Julius

experiences the double-consciousness that Baldwin, after W. E. B. Du Bois, describes as his experience in the public sphere.<sup>31</sup> What distresses Julius, beyond the glances of the white concertgoers, is his own hyper-awareness of difference. With his reference to Ota Benga, Julius points out that at every performance or exhibition he attends in these “all-white spaces,” he is simultaneously on display. He cannot see, or listen, without being seen himself. Here, Julius’s narration recalls the psychological drama Baldwin frequently represents in his fiction, where the field of visibility regularly invokes forms of policing both from within and without the black body. Indeed, in his writing and interviews, Baldwin professes a preference for Paris over New York because there he felt simply less *seen*; Parisian indifference granted him a kind of freedom from the gaze that he lacked in New York.

In the Carnegie Hall scene and others in *Open City*, however, Cole’s narrator suggests a critical difference from Baldwin that reveals how affiliation is a dynamic, transhistorical phenomenon. In the passage above, Julius finds himself “lamenting the reminders of how divided our life still remains,” a recognition of the ongoing forms of discrimination that characterize the American racial identity, but one that intones a different emotional register from what we hear in Baldwin. Julius is young and black, a “sight” no doubt, but noticeably less embattled than his predecessor. He is, after all, in Carnegie Hall to hear Mahler, whose music he is well-acquainted with, and assumes as his own because it is “not white, or black, nor old or young.” It is precisely his sense of universal access, his personal familiarity with these cultural objects and spaces that causes him to mourn “how divided our life still remains.” This divide, he all but announces, has to do with white people whose own thinking has not evolved to keep pace with their black counterparts. In this moment, Julius emerges as more contemporary than Baldwin *and* his white counterparts in the audience.

Indeed, as soon as the orchestra begins to play, Julius becomes absorbed in the music, pivoting from the “crisis of the minority,” to use Mufti’s formulation, to the assured prerogative of a connoisseur. When Cole dramatizes Julius’s emotional capacity to surrender completely to aesthetic experience, he also reveals his knowledge of, indeed expertise with the music. Far from an outsider, Julius is as native, if not more so, to this music, as knowledgeable of its movements and performance, as anyone present. Remarkably, as the symphony progresses, Julius begins to feel an expansive connection with the other audience members, as though the music were drawing them together in a way that had been impossible before:

Then, out of a calmness that seemed to have all in the auditorium holding their breaths, the sweet, hymnlike opening of the final movement, carried by the string instruments, filled the hall. I was stunned: I had never before noticed how similar the melody in this movement was to “Abide with Me.” And that revelation steeped me in the deep sorrow of Mahler’s long but radiant elegy, and I felt I could also detect the intense concentration, the hundreds of private thoughts, of the people in the auditorium with me.<sup>32</sup>

Julius’s personal identification with the music then becomes a conduit for a profound, and deeply historical, empathy with the very people from whom he had felt

so estranged before. Now Julius experiences the symphony on an intersubjective plane that evokes intense emotions of sorrow, yearning, and affiliation, acknowledging himself, Mahler, and the audience as deeply integrated through his imaginative powers. That the melody recalls to him a piece entitled "Abide with Me" reflects this achievement of, however fleeting, connectivity; the title's invitation is accepted at the very moment it occurs to him.

Baldwin felt he lacked the cultural authority to abide with, or alongside, others in the experience of such canonical Western art. Indeed, the gaze he would have endured in Carnegie Hall, had he been granted access there at all, would have been far harder and crueler than the urbane curiosity Julius now suffers. Following the passage in "Stranger in the Village" where Baldwin describes his alienation in the face of Western art, he writes, "The rage of the disesteemed is personally fruitless, but it is also absolutely inevitable . . . Rage can only with difficulty, and never entirely, be brought under the domination of intelligence. . ."<sup>33</sup> This pressure of intelligence, or what Edward Said calls critical consciousness, I argue, is what Cole illustrates in the Carnegie Hall scene of *Open City*. While Julius is himself deeply flawed, here he commands the earned *experience* of intelligence, overcoming his indignation long enough to seize the aesthetic opportunity. By doing so, he dissolves his separateness from the majority, and thus the imprisoning grip of minority status. Becoming part of the collective, Julius perceives the unified concentration of everyone, including himself, on *art* rather than on *him*. This merging with others is paradoxically liberating, if ephemeral. Indeed, in one of *Open City*'s many painful ironies, just after the triumphant moment that concludes the Mahler symphony, Julius steps outside for a breath of fresh air and finds himself locked out of the building, dangerously perched on a fire escape in foul weather. This accidental comedy of errors then dramatizes the ongoing precarity of the African-American subject in these "all-white" cultural spaces.

Baldwin has also narrated the powerful freedom of the aesthetic encounter, most famously perhaps in the final scene of his acclaimed 1965 story, "Sonny's Blues." Like Julius, Baldwin's narrator in this story experiences an intense connection to others, both present and historical, while listening to a musical performance. Baldwin writes:

Sonny's fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others. And Sonny went all the way back, he really began with the spare, flat statement of the opening phrase of the song . . . I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did . . . He had made it his: that long line, of which we knew only Mama and Daddy . . . And I was aware that this was only a moment, that the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky.<sup>34</sup>

The live music stimulates the narrator's emotional capacity to feel empathy, regard death, and, briefly, experience freedom. The vulnerability his brother's music

provokes here is pivotal, enabling him to imagine even that “long line” of ancestors he could never know. Whereas Cole’s Julius enjoys an affiliative bond with Mahler through his classical music, Baldwin’s mid-century characters need jazz, the music invented by that “all-star team” from whom Cole derives his contemporary, and native, pride. Because Cole has jazz, he can have it all, whereas Baldwin, like Sonny, must improvise his way into the future, having had behind him “only Mama and Daddy.” Indeed, in “Sonny’s Blues,” Baldwin contrasts the early gamble of avant-garde jazz with established classical music in order to show how Sonny’s ambition to play jazz initially threatens his brother’s cultural conservatism. The need to choose between jazz and classical music reflects Baldwin’s anxiety in “Stranger in the Village”; the innovation of jazz for him pioneering one’s *own* form of music, a cultural practice that is uniquely African-American.

The story I am trying to tell here has to do with the power, but also the *productivity*, of affiliative bonds across generations of black intellectual thought and creative practice. If, as Cole suggests, he enjoys a “carefree confidence” in the face of white Western culture, it is in part because of the risks, formal and psychological, taken by the vanguard artists who came before him. While Cole’s relationship toward art may differ from that of his forefather, he demonstrates how the gaze of the white man, and the institutional forms of racism and violence behind it, are as inescapable as the internal dialogue they provoke. Indeed, Cole often writes about how these subtle psychological impositions and their more blatant sociopolitical manifestations still operate in contemporary America. In another Instagram post from his “Hospitality” series, Cole responded to what he called “The Starbucks Thing,” a shocking, though not isolated, incident that took place in Philadelphia on 12 April 2018, when two young black men were arrested in the coffee shop while waiting for their friend to arrive. They were refused access to the restroom, and then, after only a few minutes, the store manager called 911 because neither of the men had purchased anything yet. Six police officers arrived and questioned the men, finally handcuffing and holding them at the station for close to nine hours before they were released. Multiple white customers who frequent Starbucks have since pointed out the double standard that they are never reported and removed for similar behavior. Cole responds:

We are not safe even in the most banal place. We are not equal even in the most common circumstances. We are always five minutes away from having our lives upended. Racism is not about doing stuff to you all the time—it’s also about passively keeping you on tenterhooks. . .

. . . This is why I always say you can’t be a black flaneur. Flanerie is for whites. For blacks in white terrain, all spaces are charged. Cafes, restaurants, museums, shops. Your own front door. This is why we are compelled, instead, to practice psychogeography. We wander alert, and pay a heavy psychic toll for that vigilance. Can’t relax, black.<sup>35</sup>

Here the most acutely painful echo of affiliation can be heard from Baldwin in Cole. Despite the passage of time, shades of political progress, and the greater

spatial and cultural mobility that Cole enjoys, the underlying racial fear and hatred that Baldwin interrogated in his work still persists in contemporary America. Baldwin repeatedly contended that the “Negro Problem” exists because white people fail to reflect upon their own fear and ignorance: “In evading my humanity, you have all done something to your own humanity.”<sup>36</sup> So until white Americans overcome their own stunted self-development, Baldwin warns that the African-American subject will suffer the perils of being the custodian of the “black body.”

At first, Cole’s disgust and pessimism in his commentary on the Starbucks incident seem to undermine the authority he professes in the earlier “Black Body.” After all, here he lists the museum as one of those “charged” spaces where one is kept “on tenterhooks,” where the mantra must be: “Can’t relax, black.” How, then, can one enjoy Mahler or Rembrandt if “we are always five minutes away from having our lives upended”? Rather than the meandering nonchalance of the *flâneur*, the African American must practice “psychogeography,” which entails the vigilant recognition that neither space nor subjectivity are neutral and anonymous. They impinge upon one another, as we see from Baldwin’s experience in Leukerbad, or that of Cole’s narrator Julius in Carnegie Hall. Can the aesthetic capacity to enjoy or interrogate culture be retained in the face of the (d)anger of this ongoing racism? How can an artist function from within this mediated experience and produce work that represents and innovates beyond it?

The dialectical nature of affiliation emerges from this transhistorical study of visuality, aesthetic experience, and social marginalization in the works of Baldwin and Cole. In place of a New York subway car, we now have a Starbucks in Philadelphia; historical and cultural conditions may change, but the punitive threats of the public sphere persist for African-American subjects. And yet, in fiction and essays, photography and Instagram posts, Cole stakes a claim to all art, regardless of origin, appealing for hospitality from a place of “willed homelessness.”<sup>37</sup> In “Secular Criticism,” Said writes that “It is in culture that we can seek out the range of meanings and ideas conveyed by the phrases *belonging to* or *in a* place, being *at home in a place*.”<sup>38</sup> What affiliative communities offer at their best, I argue, is this sense of belonging that warily refuses consolation. Instead, the dialogue between adherents sharpens their singular critiques and, in the case of Baldwin, Cole, and Ligon, imagines the ample formal resources that can be brought to bear on congruous concerns. As we turn now to the visual work of Glenn Ligon, we discover how citation and abstraction can help to picture the narrative of racial inheritance I trace here.

### Glenn Ligon: Continuity and Rupture

The contemporary artist Glenn Ligon, like Teju Cole, displays an avidity for working with language and visuality, creating artwork that is politically oriented and focused on issues of race and sexuality in America. Ligon helps to show how the differences that enliven affiliation can stem from formal as well as cultural identity markers. As a gay, African-American artist, he shares much in common with

Baldwin, but his capacious experiments in visual art demonstrate the wide range of materials and motifs that can be resourced to explore identity. If Cole professes a “carefree confidence” with Western art, Ligon can be credited with attempting to transform its very canon. At the forefront of the contemporary art scene, Ligon has figured prominently in most major Western art institutions including the Venice Biennale, a mid-career retrospective at the Whitney Museum of Art, and in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim, and Tate Modern, to name but a few. Perhaps most notably, in 2009, President Obama borrowed Ligon’s piece *Black Like Me No.2* from the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington D.C. and had it installed in the private presidential living quarters in the White House. This gesture, of a president for his preferred artwork, offers a tempting image of racial progress in America. When Baldwin wrote “Stranger in the Village” in 1953, he may not have imagined a black president one day hanging black art in the White House, but the final line of his essay seems to telegraph such a future: “This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.”<sup>39</sup>

The complicated reality this staunch declaration predicts, however, forewarns the fear and resentment of those who resist its historical imperative. Artists like Baldwin, Cole, and Ligon are affiliated precisely by their grasp of the uneven nature of racial progress, and their insistence on representing the contradictions and ongoing suffering that any easy teleological narrative or symbolic moment, however meaningful, might conceal. Though his cultural status is secure within the privileged arena of the contemporary art world, Glenn Ligon’s work continues to investigate the anxieties about self-representation that prevail upon the black body, not to mention the racial violence that threatens it, demonstrating how the urgency of these concerns has not abated since the civil rights movement. Describing Ligon’s retrospective at the Whitney, *New Yorker* art critic Peter Schjeldahl writes, “the show communicates an appealingly complex sensibility that is subject to self-doubt and aesthetic yearning, even when it is forcefully on message.”<sup>40</sup> This affective composite of self-doubt, aesthetic yearning, and forceful messaging recalls Holland Cotter’s admiration of Baldwin for his “furious uncertainty.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, as an ancestor to Ligon and Cole, Baldwin models intense skepticism and a self-disclosing vulnerability that is as rare as it is impactful when considered in the context of contemporary American masculinity. Emotional depth, artistic ambition, and political critique inform all three artists’ body of work, even as they impart these energies through divergent media and manner.

Ligon makes direct formal inquiries into how race, gender, and sexuality overlap in the symbolic imagination of white America, experimenting with visual art to pose enduring problems in new and newly meaningful ways. *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (1991–93), for example, frames Ligon’s reaction to Robert Mapplethorpe’s 1986 *The Black Book*, which included homoerotic nude photographs of black men. In this and other work, Ligon taps into the acute paradox of anxiety and desire that the black body induces in its white audience. His representation of this tension extends Baldwin’s own interrogation of the fantasies that white America harbors about the black body. As Baldwin observed in an interview with *The*



*Village Voice* commemorating the fifteenth anniversary of the Stonewall uprising, “The discovery of one’s sexual preference doesn’t have to be a trauma. It’s a trauma because it’s such a traumatized society.”<sup>42</sup> He goes on to point out that “The sexual question and the racial question have always been entwined, you know. If Americans can mature at the level of racism, then they have to mature at the level of sexuality.”<sup>43</sup> As a contemporary artist, Ligon’s body of work is especially focused on this entwined field of discourse, elaborating in photography, mixed media installations, painting, and drawing, questions that Baldwin raised in his early novel *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), but never took up explicitly in his nonfiction.

Ligon has worked with a range of media, but his tendency for inscribing text into his work makes it a trademark feature of his oeuvre. Indeed, his text paintings cite a host of cultural figures including Ralph Ellison, Richard Pryor, Gwendolyn Brooks, Jean Genet, Zora Neale Hurston, and John Howard Griffin. Citation serves as a primary formal technique for Ligon’s work, as does erasure, so that the inclusion and subsequent obfuscation of textual sources mark many of his well-known canvases. In one interview, Ligon explains, “[L]iterature has been a treacherous site for black Americans because literary production has been so tied with the project of proving our humanity through the act of writing . . . I am always interested in how black people have inhabited these overdetermined, ambivalent spaces.”<sup>44</sup> Ligon’s astute observation about the hazards of literary production for black writers has thus led him to representational practices that tread the line between assertion and refusal. At once testifying to racial presence and ancestry, and refusing its appropriation by white image culture, Ligon’s text paintings offer a visual correlative to Baldwin’s frequent play with pronouns in his nonfiction, where he alternately speaks as an “I,” “we,” and “one.” Likewise, Lauren DeLand observes, “The sources that comprise the ‘I’ of Ligon’s work are a multitude, appropriated from art and literature to suggest a series of racial, sexual, and gender particularities that resemble Ligon’s own, an ‘autobiography’ of which the subject has not written a single word.”<sup>45</sup> Just as Teju Cole’s first-person narrators often blur the lines between fiction and nonfiction, most strikingly in his travelogue *Every Day is for the Thief*, so too do Ligon and Baldwin broaden the possibilities of black subjectivity by reimagining who any “I” may speak for and be. Affiliative practice arises, then, at the level of theme and form, with all three artists finding ways to call attention to, but not collapse under the weight of, their collective and historically overdetermined racial identity.

In 2018, Ligon’s 2007 neon light installation *Palindrome #1* was featured alongside a *New York Times* opinion piece by academic George Yancy entitled, “Should I Give Up on White People?” Published the day after the Starbucks incident that Teju Cole responded to on Instagram, Yancy’s essay examines the ongoing hostility of white America toward its black citizens, as well as its refusal to face what Baldwin calls “the disagreeable mirror” he raises in the face of ignorance.<sup>46</sup> Unsurprisingly, Yancy quotes from Baldwin more than once in his piece, echoing the latter’s theory that racism persists because of our inability to examine the fear underlying it. Fitting, then, that a photograph of Ligon’s visual-linguistic work accompanied Yancy’s



**Figure 1** Glenn Ligon, *Palindrome #1*, 2007, neon, 8 x 105 inches (20.32 x 266.7 cm). Copyright © Glenn Ligon. Photo: Farzad Owrang. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

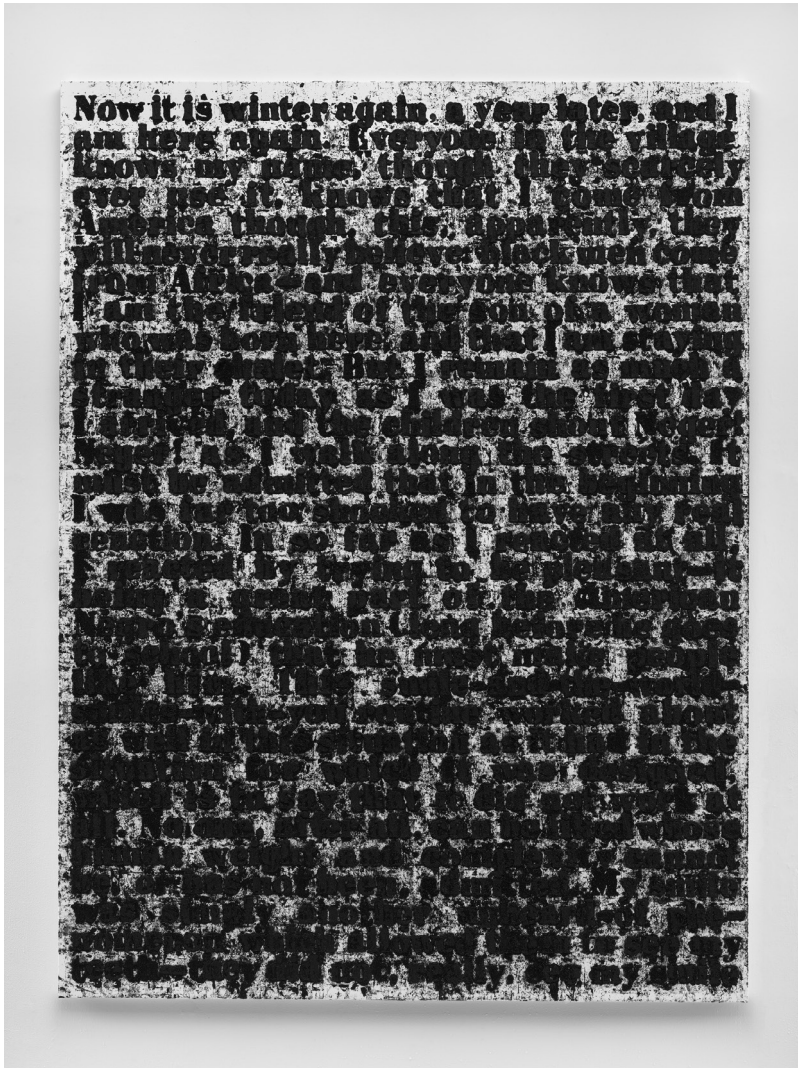
essay; in *Palindrome #1*, the artist pushes the most basic limits of the plea for intersubjective recognition by relying upon the visual trope of a mirror. If disagreeable, this mirror is so because of the failure of reciprocal beholding.

“Face Me I Face You” declares itself without a comma, thus sounding the palindrome of its title, though conspicuously the electricity that powers these claims also separates them. Indeed, the “I” here belongs to the first statement, thus reading “Face Me I.” The proximity of “Me” and “I” highlights a critical difference in how these terms signify passive and active forms of selfhood, respectively.

Elaborating on George Herbert Mead's theory of subjectivity, Jürgen Habermas explains, "Mead conceives of this 'me' as the 'generalized other,' i.e., as the behavioral expectations of one's social surroundings that have, as it were, migrated into the person. The 'I' in turn relates to this agency as a spontaneity that eludes consciousness."<sup>47</sup> By juxtaposing "me" and "I," then, Ligon demonstrates how passive and active components of one's identity coexist in any given visual encounter. Like Cole's narrator at the Carnegie Hall concert, the black subject in America must always contend with the subjective identification of a "me," as seen by others, negotiating that psychic disposition with another more spontaneous and deeply human "I" who listens to music, walks through a village, or waits for a friend in a coffeeshop. The appeal of the first half of *Palindrome #1*, "Face Me I," can then be understood as a self-command toward critical consciousness of this duality, of an "I" becoming aware of the impositions placed upon "me," in order to disrupt or resist them. This claim also directs the viewer—or, you—to face both "Me" and "I," to recognize, in other words, that what we see in others constitutes only a partial self, rendered passive by our gaze.

The second part of this palindrome, powered by its own cables, reads "Face You." Here, Ligon subverts the language of mere reciprocity—Face Me/I Face You—instead demanding that the viewer face *herself*. "Face You," in other words, is a mandate to look into the disagreeable mirror for what it may reveal. Indeed, liberal guilt and denial are as much targets for Ligon, Cole, and Baldwin as are the more blatant acts of racial violence suffered by African Americans. "Face You" directs the viewer to turn from her suspicion of the Other to the more arduous exercise of self-examination. The doubling produced by this palindrome, then, instructs both "I" and "You" toward reflection, to face "me" and "you" at once. *Palindrome #1* uses its visual-linguistic structure to prompt a collective effort toward self-honesty and critical consciousness without which the biases we harbor will continue to divide and diminish us. This message echoes one of Baldwin's most prevailing themes, that "People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction. . ."<sup>48</sup>

I want to turn now to Ligon's extensive series inspired by, and likewise named for, Baldwin's "Stranger in the Village," which most directly announces their affiliative bond. Using materials such as glue, oil paint, dust, and ink over stenciled excerpts from Baldwin's essay, Ligon concretely represents the influence of affiliation over and across historical periods. The works in this series vary in scale and overlay; *Stranger #73*, for example, which was exhibited at the David Zwirner Gallery in early 2019, took up an entire wall and included two painting panels that gave off a dim glimmer suggestive of Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shadow* paintings from the late 1970s. Some examples from the *Stranger* series showcase more of Baldwin's prose, striking a visual balance of light and dark tones on the canvas, while others use a host of physical materials to produce formidable, nearly abstract, nearly monochromatic paintings that all but mask their source material. The *Stranger* series thus affiliates Ligon with Baldwin, whose essay he cites, but also with a tradition of American abstract painters whose work served as an early inspiration for him. In one interview, Ligon professed, "Painting was my first love,



**Figure 2** Glenn Ligon, *Stranger #90*, 2018, oil stick, coal dust, and acrylic on canvas, 96 x 72 inches (243.84 x 182.88 cm). Copyright © Glenn Ligon. Photo: Ronald Amstutz. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

and I was interested in abstract painters like de Kooning, Kline, and Pollock.”<sup>49</sup> These postwar painters were contemporaries of Baldwin, émigrés to New York at a time when he had fled the city for Europe. That Ligon’s *Stranger* series embodies the influence of both racial and artistic forefathers reflects the creative possibilities

that abound in affiliative practice and the shared conveyance of willed homelessness that energizes it. Like Cole, Ligon demonstrates the expansive authority to “own all of it.”

Ligon uses this broad affiliative range and, specifically, the tension between citation and abstraction to represent the crisis of visual epistemology that afflicts American public life. His work demands that the viewer push beyond what is apparently visible in order to read beneath the surface. A rigor, not unlike that of seeing the “I” beyond the “me,” or facing “you” in the disagreeable mirror, is demanded by artwork that gestures toward abstraction but is, in its political critique and literary references, distinct from the all-black paintings of Ad Reinhardt, which it clearly references. Ligon’s work on the *Stranger* series began in 1997 and continues well into the twenty-first century. His frequent use of coal dust as a constructive medium serves to reference historical time since it, as he says, “literally bulked up the text.”<sup>50</sup> In obscuring the language it cites, Ligon’s art breathes new life into it, as when the dust that conceals an ancient artifact also helps to preserve it. Our interpretive work as viewers, then, involves imaginatively “dusting” the canvas to read its underlying history alongside the phenomenal time passage embodied at its surface by various and sundry materials.

As he developed the *Stranger* series, Ligon began to replace black overlay with white, even as he continued to incorporate stenciled quotations from Baldwin’s essay on the canvas. The decision to cover the prose passages with black or white surfaces offers a visual metaphor for how Baldwin understands racial identity in America to be mutually constitutive. In the final paragraph of “Stranger in the Village,” he writes:

One of the things that distinguishes Americans from other people is that no people has ever been so deeply involved in the lives of black men, and vice versa [. . .] It is precisely this black–white experience which may prove of indispensable value to us in the world we face today. This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.<sup>51</sup>

Baldwin’s call for honesty announces this sense of inevitability, of recognizing that black and white people’s lives are inextricably related, knowledge which he hoped would motivate the collective to imagine how this shared existence “may prove of indispensable value.” What would a white world that accepted black lives and thoughts look like? Can there be, as Teju Cole adjures, a future of embracing hospitality in which a black subject may feel equally at home and human in America? The reality of this deep, pervading involvement is what Ligon attempts to picture in works like *Stranger* #76 (2014) and *Stranger* #43 (2011). At once recalling Robert Ryman’s postwar white monochrome paintings and charging their abstraction with political content, Ligon offers a visual problem that can be read at once as the whiting out of black presence and the foundational influence of black thought on white experience. Either way, these later canvases, like their darker counterparts, are constructed with inseparable and layered components, reflecting Baldwin’s claim that racial commingling in America is as inescapable as it is difficult to grasp.



Ligon and Cole anchor themselves in the work of their predecessor but exemplify the creative potential of affiliation insofar as they proceed ever more assertively in representing, indeed *altering*, the previously “all-white spaces” of American culture. As curator Thelma Golden said to Ligon, with reference to other black artists’ work in the *Freestyle* exhibition at the Studio Museum in 2000: “it is also about an extremely innovative effort not so much towards reclaiming or reflecting on the past, but moving towards writing a new history from the present moment.”<sup>52</sup> Each inscription and rereading of Baldwin’s work in Ligon’s oeuvre can, from this perspective, be seen as a new historical marker, an accent that directs the trajectory of this intellectual genealogy into the future toward more empowered critical consciousness. Ligon’s penchant for transforming language into abstraction is a canny formal move that reflects the confluence of aesthetic and intellectual strategies. His formal experiments offer a way to think visually about Baldwin’s critique that “Americans attempt until today to make an abstraction of the Negro, but the very nature of these abstractions reveals the tremendous effects the presence of the Negro has had on the American character.”<sup>53</sup> At once making “an abstraction of the Negro” and revealing his “tremendous effects” on the surface of the canvas, Ligon’s paintings walk the razor’s edge between illegibility and presence, supplying a kind of formal code for deciphering the singularity of American racial history.

Across his oeuvre, Ligon reflects his affiliation to literary artists not only by quoting from them, but in his assiduous return to hermeneutics, the very problem of reading and interpretation. His work pictures how one can resource predecessors to say what still needs to be said, but also how those efforts might get interpreted, disseminated, and appropriated by the very powers they resist. Baldwin, Cole, and Ligon are all deeply concerned with the degree to which Americans can cultivate their interpretive powers in aesthetic experience, but also and especially in the public sphere, where the stakes for misreading a situation or person may be life or death. In one interview from 1965, Baldwin points out that

We [whites and blacks] are locked together in a kind of misunderstanding of each other. And I do think that in this kind of dance, as you put it, one is trying—both of us are trying to come closer to something human in each of us. We’re afflicted by the terms we use. For example, if one would drop the phrase “Negro,” one would understand one was dealing with just human beings, with people.<sup>54</sup>

We have, since Baldwin wrote those lines, dropped the term “Negro,” though misunderstanding persists, arising as Cole shows in the most banal and quotidian encounters. Have our phenomenal encounters with one another advanced beyond those children who shouted “*Neger!*” at Baldwin in the village, or does its echo still resound in the terror that informs the mistaken reactions of white Americans to their black counterparts? To amend these interpretive failures, we must, as Baldwin recommends, direct a greater attention to the “terms we use,” and the patience with which we read them. Glenn Ligon’s work calls particular attention to the overlays and misapprehension that challenge legibility but also offers an allegory for the kinds of conversations we have with one another in both public and relatively intimate spaces.

### Not a Conclusion: Creative Evolution

From Teju Cole's photographs and essays to Glenn Ligon's citations of black writers and his family album project, we perceive a clear commitment to affiliative thinking.<sup>55</sup> These artists construct cross-generational bonds upon the axes of aesthetic and racial identity that allow for tonal variation as well as medium-specific experiments. In their contemporary engagement with James Baldwin, Glenn Ligon and Teju Cole celebrate his ongoing relevance for African-American politics and art, while imagining new psychogeographies for the "I" of black self-representation to assume power. As Ligon, Cole, and Baldwin show, affiliation lends nuance and range to the burdens of self-representation by offering interdisciplinary models for how the needs of any "I" in black America might be articulated. I have been using the phrase "creative evolution" from Henri Bergson's book of the same name to describe the force of this particular genealogy of African-American artists. In retracing, literally in the case of Ligon, Baldwin's claims in "Stranger in the Village," these artists testify to the urgency of his lessons for current politics, even as they advance with new formal experiments that reflect periodization and contemporary art practices. Baldwin's original creative impulse thus gets replenished through both revisitation and new production. In *Creative Evolution*, Bergson characterizes this process as inherently vital and ongoing:

There is no doubt that life as a whole is an evolution, that is, an unceasing transformation. But life can progress only by means of the living, which are its depositories. Innumerable living beings, almost alike, have to repeat each other in space and in time for the novelty they are working out to grow and mature. It is like a book that advances towards a new edition by going through thousands of reprints with thousands of copies. There is, however, this difference between the two cases, that the successive impressions are identical, as well as the simultaneous copies of the same impression, whereas representatives of one and the same species are never entirely the same, either in different points of space or at different moments of time. Heredity does not only transmit characters; it transmits also the impetus in virtue of which the characters are modified, and this impetus is vitality itself.<sup>56</sup>

Glenn Ligon's inscriptions and reinscriptions of Baldwin's work for over a decade perform this exercise of studious advancement "towards a new edition," while reflecting his archival attention to the original. Likewise, Teju Cole's physical journey to retrace Baldwin's steps in Leukerbad produces an uncanny correspondence as well as the awareness of his undeniable difference from this forefather. These artists, who together encompass three generations of contemporary black intellectual thought, produce a constellation of concern, a cluster of stars we might call "Strangers in the Village." In a reversal of the cosmos, however, this constellation illuminates blackness in a white world. Their genealogy reflects shared racial and artistic orientations, and especially the "impetus of vitality" they bring to their work and the political arena in which they operate. Importantly, these affiliative energies expand beyond Baldwin, Ligon, and Cole, as each enjoys kinship with other artists and intellectuals. Edward Said, Erich Auerbach, Henry James, Franz



Kline, Willem de Kooning, Bessie Smith, Jean Genet, and W. G. Sebald enhance the dimensions of affiliation, modeling how the confident borrowing and sharing between multiracial cultures can enrich art practice and social history. In their self-conscious adoption of Baldwin as a forefather, however, Ligon and Cole set an intention for their innovative vitality, proving able to revisit something “very, very old” and discover a way to “outdistance” it.

## Notes

- 1 James Baldwin, “The Image: Three views – Ben Shahn, Darius Milhaud and James Baldwin Debate the Real Meaning of a Fashionable Term,” *Opera News*, 27 (8 December 1962), pp. 9–12. Reprinted in Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt (eds.), *Conversations with James Baldwin* (Jackson, MS, University of Mississippi Press, 1989), p. 31.
- 2 Teju Cole, Interview with Aaron Bady, 19 November 2015, <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2015/01/interview-teju-cole/> (accessed 25 April 2018).
- 3 See [www.davidzwirner.com/exhibitions/god-made-my-face-collective-portrait-james-baldwin](http://www.davidzwirner.com/exhibitions/god-made-my-face-collective-portrait-james-baldwin) (accessed 16 June 2019). See also Leah Mirakhor’s review of the exhibit in this volume, pp. 160–77.
- 4 My essay, “Teju Cole’s *Blind Spot*: Sharing Inwardness,” is forthcoming in *Word and Image*.
- 5 Edward Said, “Secular Criticism” (1983), in *The Edward Said Reader*, ed. Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin (New York, Vintage, 2000), pp. 218–42, 235. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.
- 6 Specifically, Said writes, “*Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* are two especially well-known instances, but there is similar evidence to be found in *Death in Venice* or *The Way of All Flesh*, *Jude the Obscure*, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Mallarmé’s and Hopkins’ poetry, much of Wilde’s writing, and *Nostromo*” (“Secular Criticism,” p. 231).
- 7 Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (Mineola, NY, Dover, 1998). All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.
- 8 Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, p. 231.
- 9 Said, “Secular Criticism,” p. 235.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 239.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 225.
- 12 In several of his essays about Paris, as well as short stories like “This Morning, This Evening, So Soon,” Baldwin elaborates on the imaginative and pragmatic benefits he derived from living abroad in the early years of his career.
- 13 Aamir R. Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism, and the Question of Minority Culture,” *Critical Inquiry*, 25:1 (1998), pp. 95–125, 96.
- 14 James Baldwin, “Disturber of the Peace – James Baldwin” (1969), in Standley and Pratt (eds.), *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 81.
- 15 James Baldwin, “Autobiographical Notes,” in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston, MA, Beacon Press, 1983), p. 7. In this essay, Baldwin describes himself as an interloper without a heritage of his own. He feels alienated in the face of various cultural sites though he admires them. I argue that this term serves as a motif for him across his career and travels, attesting to his transatlantic mobility, his political and cultural affiliations, and his feelings of alienation in relation to Western art.
- 16 James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village,” in *Notes of a Native Son*, pp. 159–75, 162. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 173.
- 20 Mufti, "Auerbach in Istanbul," p. 101.
- 21 Said, "Secular Criticism," p. 238.
- 22 Teju Cole, "Black Body" (2014), in *Known and Strange Things* (New York, Random House, 2016), pp. 3–16, 5. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.
- 23 Teju Cole [@\_tejucole], Instagram post, 9 May 2018, retrieved from URL. Cole has since deleted the prose accompanying this post and many others.
- 24 Cole, "Black Body," p. 9.
- 25 In a compelling amendment to Baldwin's felt lack of community, a selection of 14 works on paper titled *Baldwin* and from Marlene Dumas's ongoing series *Great Men* was included in the recent Baldwin group show at the David Zwirner Gallery. Displayed on one wall of the gallery, sketches of Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Beauford Delaney, and Tennessee Williams, among others, attest to the enduring power of affiliative communities.
- 26 Cole, "Black Body," p. 10.
- 27 See Walter D. Mignolo and Madina V. Tlostanova, "Theorizing from the Borders Shifting to Geo- and Body-Politics of Knowledge," *European Journal of Social Theory*, 9:2 (2006), pp. 205–21.
- 28 Miriam Pahl, "Afropolitanism as Critical Consciousness: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's and Teju Cole's Internet Presence," *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 28:1 (2016), pp. 73–87, 74.
- 29 Cole, "Black Body," p. 11.
- 30 Teju Cole, *Open City* (New York, Random House, 2011), pp. 251–2. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.
- 31 See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), in which the author contends that black people must always have two fields of vision which include how they seem themselves and a consciousness of how the world sees them.
- 32 Cole, *Open City*, p. 253.
- 33 Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," p. 165.
- 34 James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues" (1965), in *Going to Meet the Man* (New York, Vintage, 1995).
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